

The Founding of Peoria and Its Environment

John Losby
Teacher: Mindy Juriga
Washington School, Peoria

Originally, the area surrounding present-day Peoria was an environment untouched by man. A tranquil river with crystal clear water, and a forest with an abundance of game surrounded this river on both sides. This scene slowly changed with the arrival, in 1673, of the Europeans who were traveling in crude Indian canoes. As a result, the abundance of resources has given the city of Peoria life, and it is no surprise that throughout history the area has allowed two French settlements and an American settlement to grow on the banks of Lake Peoria.

Two courageous men were the founding fathers of French Peoria. The first was Henri DeTonti. He worked under the famed explorer, Robert LaSalle whose accomplishments include claiming the entire Mississippi valley for France.

The story of Peoria began with these two men in the late 1600s in a different location. In 1673, LaSalle's team of explorers met the Peoria Indians in present day Iowa. In spite of the fact that the tribe's original homeland was Illinois, the aggressive Iroquois tribe had pushed them into Iowa. The Native Americans suggested that the team travel up the Illinois River because plentiful lands surround it. When they landed, LaSalle, DeTonti, and their team founded Fort Crevecouer, named after French for broken heart. This fort was originally built for French exploration of the Gulf of Mexico. Afterward, in 1680, disaster occurred and the workmen abandoned the fort as a result of a mutiny. A year later, LaSalle set out to explore the Mississippi and left DeTonti in charge of the

Native Americans that they had unified against the aggressive Iroquois. Fort St. Louis was out of reach of water and the Native Americans in the area and the French settlers strained the water supply as well as food sources.

This problem at Fort St. Louis resulted in DeTonti moving the fort to present day Adams Street. The new fort was designed so Native Americans friendly to the French could come to the fort for protection against the Iroquois. These friendly Native Americans included the five tribes of the Illinois nation, which included the Peoria Indians. Shortly after the founding of the fort, a mission was added and headed by Father Sebastian Rasle and Father Jacques Gravier. The fort proved to be of great importance because it maintained the French fur trade monopoly. Another purpose of Fort St. Louis was to defend the Mississippi Valley, which LaSalle had earlier claimed, from the Iroquois and the English. The English were at the time a potential threat to France because the two countries were at war in the 1690s. The uses of the fort do not end here; it was also used to bring settlers to the Mississippi valley and convert the Native Americans to Roman Catholicism.

Though in the 1690s New Fort St. Louis thrived, good times did not last too much longer. France and Britain finally made peace in 1697; as a result, France turned its attention elsewhere. Native Americans no longer relied on the fort because the Iroquois's threat decreased. The year of 1703 brought more bad luck for Fort St. Louis. DeTonti was in grave debt as a result of the expenses he paid to keep the fort going for so many years. The fort's economy was also in trouble because the French government issued laws that regulated trade and finally the settlers were ordered to leave.

By 1778 the Mississippi valley was under American control, yet most of the inhabitants in the Peoria area were French or Native Americans. Although Fort St. Louis was gone by 1778, another Frenchman founded another village. Eventually, this village died after Americans drove out the settlers. In 1819, the final set of founding fathers arrived on horseback and began to build Peoria.

The reason Peoria was founded and then died and was settled again becomes obvious when the facts are closely examined. The Illinois River's abundance of fish and adjacent woods overflowing with game is one reason the location had been popular among Native Americans and settlers. The Illinois River alone can be credited with giving birth to Peoria because LaSalle and de DeTonti had arrived there via Indian canoes after Indians told the two of the area's abundance. Moreover, Peoria started out as a farming village as a result of the rich soil and even today inhabitants take advantage of this resource. The presence of corn and clear fresh water allowed distilleries to flourish. For these reasons, Lake Peoria has presented many opportunities to its inhabitants and as a result the Native Americans called it Pimitoui, meaning "land of great plenty."

For about 120 years the French lived in Pimitoui, but little is left of their legacy. A few street names and a hotel called Pere Marquette are all that remains of the French past. For many years the existence of a French fort located where Peoria is today was nothing but a fable. However, in November 2001, evidence was found of the fort. The site of this discovery was Northeast Adams Street, where a foundation of a cabin and a broken wine bottle were unearthed.

In conclusion, the abundance of resources has given the city of Peoria life, and it is no surprise that throughout history the area has nurtured two French settlements and one

American settlement on the banks of Lake Peoria. Peoria has survived for hundreds of years and thanks to its environment, it has become a bustling city with well over 100,000 citizens. [From Bill Adams, *Bill Adams Tester Days*; Bill Adams, "The Village that Became Peoria," *The Journal Star*, (Oct. 28, 1991); "The City Started as a Fort on the River," *Observer*, (Oct. 2, 1991); John Clayton, *The Illinois Fact Book and Historical Almanac 1673- 1678*; James E. Davis, *Frontier Illinois*; Elaine Hopkins, "Artifacts Provide Links to Peoria's French Past," *The Journal Star*, (Nov. 10, 2001); Jerry Klein, *Peoria!*; Brian J. Ogg, *Wish You Were Here: Peoria Edition*; "Peoria—First European Settlement in Illinois." Online. Internet. Available URL: <http://www.peoria.org/history.cfm>, (Sept. 10, 2002).]